Engaging Youth in Cultural Heritage: Time, Place and Communication

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1. Introduction

Debates about heritage have posed questions about what is of value and who can ascribe value. These debates often centre on the types of places that are afforded official heritage value as well as the kinds of 'experts' who are sufficiently trained and educated to be able to ascribe this official value. At the root of all of these debates is a desire to try and understand why something is so valuable that it should be retained for future generations. Contained within this is a belief summed up by the National Trust that heritage is "forever" and by English Heritage that it belongs to "everyone". These totalising statements provide the impression that access to heritage is equal and in the name of the greater good of future generations. However, certain groups remain disadvantaged within this system.

Young people are one of these groups as they "remain largely anonymous from heritage conservation policy and practice" (Azevedo, 2012: 3). Similarly, the role of heritage within the youth sector more generally is also undervalued as "(youth) organisations were found to not immediately connect heritage to youth work, with heritage viewed as an abstract construct" (CPI, 2015: 37). However, research carried out on the "world's oldest surviving skateboard spot" as well as documentary analysis of the Young Roots programme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund has illustrated that engaging young people with heritage can have wider benefits for both the heritage and built environment sectors.

This report will examine some of the ways in which young people both form and powerfully express their value of historic places. In doing so it is intended that the views of young people can inform the ongoing evolution of the heritage sector in the UK. To achieve this the report will focus on how the relationship between young people and heritage develops and in particular the role of place and time within this. In doing so it is intended that the abstract nature of heritage will be broken down with the aim that the findings can provide "youth workers and professionals the right tools to engage young people with heritage and encourage them to think about heritage projects" (CPI, 2015: 37).

2. Research

The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under their Care for the Future programme. Researchers from the universities of East Anglia, Glasgow, Newcastle and Sussex worked in collaboration with the Heritage Lottery Fund and the film company Brazen Bunch to examine how young people engaged with heritage. The research was conducted between January and December 2015. Other project outputs to date include a 20-minute film and a workshop held at the House of Vans on 24th November 2015 at which members of the youth and heritage sectors discussed the role of young people within heritage.

2.1 Research Design

The primary focus of the research was the Long Live Southbank Campaign which used the tagline 'You Can't Move History: You Can Secure the Future' to prevent the loss of the "world's oldest surviving skateboard spot" as a result of the planned expansion of the Southbank Centre. This research took the form of 25 interviews with key stakeholders involved in securing the future of the Southbank Undercroft. In addition to this the researchers analysed a large, extant archival base consisting of newspaper clippings, press releases, correspondence between key stakeholders and planning documents in order to understand the historic significance of this skate spot. Furthermore, the researchers also worked with the Heritage Lottery Fund in order to place the LLSB findings within the context of their Young Roots programme which is intended to provide an arena in which young people and heritage organisations are brought together to research, deliver and celebrate aspects that they define as heritage. This report considers the findings from the interviews conducted with the stakeholders during the period January to December 2015.

2.2 Research Questions

The report is designed to answer two main research questions:

1. In what ways do young people engage with urban heritage?
2. How can this engagement be used to develop a better understanding of the relationship between young people and historic places?
3.

In doing so the report aims to use these findings to engage with debates within the heritage sector as to the ways in which young people value the historic urban environment. The report is therefore also intended to be of interest to the built environment sector more generally.

2.3 Case Study: Long Live Southbank

The primary focus of the research lay with the Undercroft situated within the Southbank Centre in London. The Undercroft, located in the supporting structures of the Southbank Centre complex, was previously an unused piece of land which was, from 1973 onwards, populated by skaters when they found the topography and layout to be ideal for practicing and developing tricks (LLSB, 2014). This space has been the object of long-running contestation between the Southbank Centre and the skaters which culminated in the decision in January 2015 to retain the Undercroft through a Section 106 agreement. The research focused on the ways in which this space organically developed into a palimpsest containing forty-years worth of memories, meanings and social practices. Generations of young people: skateboarders, BMXers and graffiti artists, have written their stories into and reinscribed the meaning of the skate spot as a series of redevelopments have changed its shape and reduced its size. Crucially, successive pressures to redevelop the site since the 1970s failed to understand the special relationship between the skaters' social practices and the physical space. The 2013 desire to move the skate spot to the Hungerford Bridge yet again failed to understand that physical relocation equated to emotional displacement and disrupted the intimate relationship between usage and physicality. This report considers how this relationship developed and how this develops our understanding of how young people engage with heritage.

3. Main Findings

The report draws four main conclusions about how the young people involved in the research understood their historic environment:

- Firstly, the ways in which young people conceptualised **time** differed from the understandings currently embedded in the legislative heritage system.
- Secondly, there was no distinction between **intangible and tangible** heritage within the minds of the young people. Rather, the practice of skateboarding was inextricably connected to the physical space in which it was expressed.
- Thirdly, the young people valued the architecture for what it **enabled** them to do in terms of physically challenging them, stimulating their minds and facilitating social interaction. This led to a less bounded, site-based interpretation of place and to a more networked understanding.
- Finally, the report considers how the messages were **communicated** to conclude that young people developed their own mediums for communication that were often at odds with traditional ways of decision making.

3.1 Re-defining Heritage: Time

There is a bias towards age within the current UK system of heritage protection, summarised in the statement that "the older a building is, the more likely it is to be listed" (Historic England, 2015). The official requirement within England is that:

> "All buildings built before 1700 which survive in anything like their original condition are listed, as are most of those built between 1700 and 1840. Particularly careful selection is required for buildings from the period after 1945. Usually a building has to be over 30 years old to be eligible for listing."

This way of framing heritage rests on a linear understanding of time and on an attempt to make the recording of the past neutral and objective. In other words, the significance of development that took place in the past is seen as arising naturally from age, rather than being given to it by society. However, this way of thinking about the past was only partly supported by the young people interviewed in the research into the Southbank Undercroft. One participant emphasised that "history is yesterday". The young people further developed this to make direct comparisons with existing heritage sites within the UK. They formed a clear distinction between what they saw as more "modern heritage sites" such as the Southbank Undercroft and places that are "hundreds of years old" such as Stonehenge

and the Tower of London. Those interviewed as part of the research expressed support for conserving older heritage sites, but in the case of the Southbank undercroft they felt that the number of years didn't matter to them as it was more about the "mark" that the place had made on history and the potential for this to continue in the future. In their opinion the cultural symbolism of the space mattered more than the number of years it had been used as a skate spot. The perceived contribution of the Undercroft to the cultural community that surrounds skateboarding was thus the overriding factor why the young people believed the place was historically significant.

The historic value of the Undercroft for the young people rested with the events that had happened within the space rather than the age of the physical space itself. To stay true to the history of the site the skate spot had to remain open and skateable. This was powerfully expressed by those interviewed who recoiled at the prospect of a museum to skateboarding being incorporated within the new plans for the Southbank Centre. Whilst this is an accepted way of preserving cultural memories such as with the National Football Museum it contradicted the desire of the young people to respect the living heritage of the Undercroft. There was a strongly held belief that the space could not be a museum nor could the experience of skating be authentically represented in an exhibition:

> "…you can put a room full of history about Southbank, but it's not about that, because that's finished, that's it - that's a picture on the wall. But the ongoing process is what matters, the evolution of it."

Heritage to the young people was not a static marker to a completed history but rather an active process in which successive generations were able to further develop the layers of history within the Undercroft. In this definition heritage is as much about the continuum between the present and the future as it is between the past and the present. Indeed, the power of youth and their confidence that: "the future is in the eyes of the young, and not the minds of the old" (LLSB, 2014) is a crucial part of understanding how they were able to re-define the temporal parameters of heritage.

3.2 Intangible and Tangible Heritage

Traditional forms of conservation have often adopted a “preserve-as-found” approach emphasising the importance of sympathetic maintenance and repair using historic methods, while more recent forms of “active conservation” have sought to exploit the meanings attached to the historic environment as a way of managing and developing places. In contrast, the dominant concern of the young people interviewed in the research was for the way in which place enabled particular activities. These activities were not just about skating, but also included social networks, forms of identification and different ways of using place artistically, creatively and recreationally. The physical fabric of place was seen as important because of its relationship with, including its alteration by, these activities and therefore damage and wear were not seen as requiring repair but were instead valued as a form of patina which was of significantly more relevance than the architect’s original intention for the space.

In the case of the Southbank Undercroft, the physical space became a centre of meaning despite the fact that the physical fabric had been damaged. In line with the fluid definition of heritage referred to earlier, contemporary changes to the space were seen as adding to its historic value. For example, the marks in the concrete were not seen as something to be restored but rather were appreciated as an intrinsic part of the site’s ongoing history. The stones were thought to carry the cultural memory of the previous generations of skateboarders:

> “In the stones itself there is marks of tricks that people have done that nobody even remembers anymore, but that somebody might have saw, that never left them, that’s the kind of place it is really.”

These tricks were not seen as independent from the space but rather shaped by architectural form. The architecture was simultaneously described as “dynamic” and “amazing” as well as “brutal” and “dull” but the skaters stated that they had grown to “love” it. This emotional connection was generated from the possibilities that the space afforded the skaters. Contrary to the legislative heritage system this space was not valued for it’s original use and architectural association but rather for the ways that successive generations of young people were able to interpret and re-interpret the columns and the concrete surfaces. In this way the historic value rested with the ability of the space to facilitate new and different encounters between people and place.

The forms of identification with the Undercroft illustrated above emphasise the importance that skating has, as a form of intangible heritage, in contributing to the way that the physical heritage of the Undercroft is valued. Intangible heritage is currently a highly contested aspect of the UK heritage sector. Indeed, the UK still has not ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Heritage and as such the meanings, memories and practices associated with particular cultures are not afforded any legislative protection. The findings from the Southbank Centre illustrate that "intangible heritage gives meanings, values and contexts to objects and places. The individual elements cannot be separated; they are inextricably linked." (ICOMOS: 2004: 4).

This was demonstrated in a variety of ways but most clearly through the inextricable connection that was drawn by the skaters between their space and their practices. For example, skateboarding was seen by the young people as an art form that provided a language through which they could interpret their environment. A purpose-built skate park would not, in the eyes of the young people, have the same value because the skaters needed to "find new ways to interact" with their environment and in doing so be able to express themselves "within the confines of the urban city in which we were born into". As such the value, unlike within the statutory guidelines for Historic England, did not rest with the aesthetics but rather with the sensorial experience of the tangible space.

The young people evoked the smell, sound, touch and feel of the space in intimate detail.

> "…just the way it sounds, people can tell you exactly the way it sounds, I can hear a thousand different sounds, only one place sounds like Southbank, that's it."

These sensorial experiences were also connected to the feel of place as the young people talked about the way skating at the Undercroft was "integrated" within their "muscle memory". This physical memory was matched by an "imprint" on their "psyche" which ensured that the Undercroft was "very special to me and to anyone who's ever skated here". These sensorial experiences are not the kinds of values that can be unlocked during an on-site survey or by the kind of desk-based research often carried out prior to designation yet conveys a deep sense of attachment to their "spiritual home". The relationship between intangible and tangible heritage was summed up by one interviewee who believed that the "space is always within the people". These powerful expressions of why the "world's oldest surviving skate spot" matters to the young people engage with some of the more challenging aspects of the current UK heritage sector.

3.3 Place as Enabler

Legislative and policy protection for listed buildings places a strong emphasis not only on the building or monument itself but also on its setting, which is often understood in visual and aesthetic terms. Within this boundary, historic sites essentially benefit from a higher level of protection and a different development regime. Comparisons have sometimes been drawn with national or wildlife parks in which particular species or ways of life are encouraged without disrupting the dominant ways of living that go on outside of the parks.

The importance of visual criteria for heritage protection contrasts with only rare mention of aesthetic value by those interviewed as part of the project. Rather, the young people chose to focus on what the historic space enabled them to do. The look of the building was referred to as "dull" by the participants yet this did not stop them developing a strong relationship to it. To the skaters it didn't matter what the building looked like but only that it had "shaped" "a lot of our lives". They remarked that using the space had opened their eyes to the surrounding environment:

> "I never thought I'd be so interested in architecture, it wasn't something I was interested in at school, but I was growing up skateboarding here and I was surrounded by this amazing architecture…..It's the shiny building for us, the South Bank, the concrete, all of this, that's what it is and you can't recreate that and everything that's gone with it, you really can't."

Nevertheless, South Bank was also recognised as just one, albeit central and symbolically important, site within a wider skate boarding scene in London. Skaters would meet at South Bank but might then go off skating to other locations. In this way South Bank formed an important part of a social map, sometimes described as the hub.

> "Yeah, South Bank is the hub of skating in London for sure, so it's like everybody had micro scenes happening in different parts of London or the country but it was kind of the place where we all congregated, we all came and we met so it centralised skateboarding." (Winstan)

The spaces and networks available to skaters has changed over the years, with security policies tightening in some areas and barriers or anti-skating architecture also being introduced, while other locations such as the Shell Centre have also remained important locations. For those immersed in skate culture at the Undercroft the importance of its visual setting, including the sight lines across the Thames which were strongly valued by English Heritage, were of lesser or secondary importance to maintaining the culture of skating and socialising in the area and the less commercialised claims it makes on public spaces.

3.4 Communicating Place

The interviews with stakeholders – LLSB campaigners, Undercroft skate community, South Bank Centre – revealed that (mis)communication was a major obstacle to negotiation. The LLSB's eschewing of traditional organisational structures and discursive frameworks proved a problem for the SBC, and necessitated the intervention of professional mediators – including legal representation – and, quoting on of the campaigners, adopting modes of communication that were unfamiliar and distressing for them. One of the campaigners described the stresses of having to "become one of these politician types", explaining:

> "It was so hard because I had to start using language that I would not usually use to describe skateboarding, because I was translating it. And every time I was saying something or putting out a video or writing something, you know, I was always conscious of what the skateboarders thought of it. Because the biggest job was to represent them […]"

As this quote highlights, traditional planning and heritage frameworks were not receptive to the "language" of the skateboarders, and therefore the campaign had to adapt to a discursive terrain that served to disempower them, and threatened to compromise and inauthenticate their message. In order for the opinions and values of diverse stakeholders – and particularly youth and subcultural groups – to be recognized, institutional frameworks must be more open to and facilitate alternative forms of discourse and expertise that fall outside traditional frameworks.

The speech given by one of the young campaigners at the project workshop at House of Vans was a revelation, in that representatives of a number of heritage and planning institutions expressed that they finally "got it" in terms of why this particular history could not be moved in the way that sports venues could.[1] Likewise, the campaigners felt they were heard and understood, and were able to move forward with a more productive dialogue with key institutions. Providing spaces – physical, virtual, and discursive – that facilitate multiple voices and modes of communication to intersect is vital in such disputes and negotiations. This might be simply providing a more welcoming or neutral site for dialogue to be fostered, and the possibility for people to engage in discussions in more creative and/or familiar languages, which might include facilitating them in producing and uploading content such as photographs and films.

[1] http://www.llsb.com/you-cant-move-history-workshop-talk/

4. Conclusions

Taken together the research shows that young people think about heritage in ways that are different from the existing legislative heritage system. This is explicit in five main ways:

- Firstly, the role of time and age. The reverence of time seen within the designation of historic assets within the UK is not a primary concern to the young people.

- Secondly, the young people interviewed as part of this research adopted a much more fluid concept of heritage that was as much about the future of history as it was something that was completed and in the past.

- Thirdly, this continuum between past, present and future ensured that multiple layers of value were ascribed to physical spaces and that the survival of the physical space was important for reasons that stretched beyond a veneration of the built fabric.

- Fourthly, the importance of aesthetic value of the building was not a consideration and was replaced by the capacity of the space to enable new relationships to form.

- Fifthly and finally, there was a much more explicit recognition that the intangible heritage of the Southbank Undercroft was at least on a par with the tangible space.

The overall conclusion rests with the belief that everyday practices are embedded within a physical space and as such are indivisible within the minds of the young people. Recreating the space elsewhere was simply not an option as the value of the Undercroft emerged from it's capacity to enable successive generations of skaters to re-interpret the urban environment. Furthermore, the mediums of communications used by young people also provide a different way of expressing the value of heritage and taken together this illustrates the need for the traditional heritage sector to consider not just what young people value but how they express this value. Overall this report emphasises the importance of developing a better understanding of how everyday practices, art forms, and cultures can be considered within the designation and management of historic assets.

5. Recommendations

Research on the South Bank highlights the importance of critically inquiring into questions about what makes history relevant and why heritage is valuable. More attention needs to be given to the diverse ways in which the past is understood and seen as relevant. While traditional approaches to heritage can make it seem as if history is objective, totalising and shared, there is increasing recognition that diverse societies are also diverse in the way that they make use of the past. It may be useful to ask 'what is the past good for?' and to locate different pasts within discussions about the challenges facing society today, including our aspirations for a better future. A number of suggestions for further work can be drawn from these reflections:

5.1 There could be greater coordination across the youth and heritage sectors so that pathways to influence decision making are embedded within existing structures. Youth organisations might seek to ground heritage exploration in an understanding of the lives and activities that matter to young people, and the places they actively use and value. Young people should be supported to generate their own research questions on these topics and formulate original ways of learning about their history.

5.2 Work on the above questions by youth organisations could be used to inform debates with the heritage sector. Young people could be formally involved in heritage decision making not just within the context of awarding grants for projects but across all national built environment organisations. This involvement could be framed around their interpretation of the existing environment including the way that they use space and the impact of their sensorial experiences on their relationship to the urban environment.

5.3 Innovation is needed with different methods and education techniques capable of identifying how young people play in and express themselves by associating with places. Institutional frameworks should be more open to, even facilitate alternative and creative modes of engagement in heritage debates. This includes an appreciation of a more diverse ways of approaching an understanding of heritage, but also providing spaces – physical, virtual, and discursive – for modes of engagement and debate that are more familiar to youth and subcultural groups.